

Frank McKee  
6110 Pacheco Pass Hwy  
Silvery Calif 95020

## A TRIP TO MT. HAMILTON IN 1915

by  
Frank H. McKee

I'll call these few flashbacks in the memory of one who has made the journey countless times; a trip to Mt. Hamilton, because in those days it was, indeed, a trip. It would have been impossible to even start to convince those old-timers I traveled with, how today a simple push of a foot throttle could swish you up to Mt. Hamilton from San Jose in less than one hour.

My mother's uncle had a homestead 14 miles on past Mt. Hamilton. It was situated in a beautiful little valley. He loved the place and used to go over there and stay several months at a time. He persuaded my mother to file on some government land that was available at that time. She did, and eventually received her title to the land.

She became so fond of the country she would take any chance she could to go over there. In those days it was unthinkable to go unless you could stay at least two weeks, and many times my mother, with three children aboard a light spring wagon, loaded for a three or four week stay, would lightly touch the whip to acquire a pair of horses--at least to our minds--that could be had, and away we'd go.

It was about a 50 mile trip over a road that, to this day, 50 years later, hasn't changed much and throws fear into scores of seasoned travelers even while in the comfort and comparative safety of a \$6,000 station wagon. The road has been improved a little but it is still hazardous in places. To me it's the same and a pleasant memory pops out around each turn.

My father could not go over to the ranch for a long stay as he was in business in San Jose and was needed here. During summer vacations, however, he would go over with us but would return after a week or so and the rest of us would stay on several weeks more. My father would arrange with John Wäbel to haul us up to Mt. Hamilton; my mother's uncle would meet us there and we would continue

on to the ranch with him.

Mr. Wiebel had a contract hauling supplies up to Lick Observatory that was situated atop Mt. Hamilton. He was a great friend of my family so there was no problem hitching a ride with him.

~~Mr. Wiebel was a wonderful man, large and powerful.~~ He was a road building contractor and built many roads in Santa Clara County, including the upper road into Alum Rock Park. It was Mr. Wiebel's teams that did most of the work building Lick Observatory on Mt. Hamilton and the road to it. The upper road into Alum Rock Park is a two-way road--you go in one way and come out another at the same spot. Had it not been for Wiebel's foresight a traffic problem would have appeared there long ago.

The road has never been changed. Maybe this bears out my thoughts as a ten year old boy. Anything Mr. Wiebel said or did just couldn't be improved upon.

Getting ready to go, loading the wagon and being told to fetch this, and fetch that, by Mr. Wiebel, was as much fun as going. But when that enormous man settled high on the seat with me squeezing beside him as close as I could get, looked over those wonderful horses and back at the rear for one final inspection and hollered, "Yeah," the thrilling blast-off of the astronauts was small stuff compared to the spine-tingling joy I felt when that greatest of all teams stepped out and started for Mt. Hamilton.

We started from Third and San Fernando Streets, out Santa Clara to Alum Rock Avenue and up to Mt. Hamilton Road. Starting from the bottom of Alum Rock hill our next stop was the Grand View House and up-hill all the way. From here on it was an absolute must that your horses be in top shape for this was no trip for an animal that possessed some of the many horse defects not easily detected.

The Mt. Hamilton road rises sharply and it is not long until you encounter a wonderful view, a beautiful panorama of the entire Santa Clara Valley.

Mr. and Mrs. Story ran Grand View House; the Mt. Hamilton Stage used to change horses there, but Mr. Wiebel preferred to go

on to Smith Creek. He didn't like to spend much time there as the road to Hall's Valley was mostly downhill and he could make up for the slow time coming up from the Valley. He watered the horses; adjusted the harness, collar, pads, etc., and in a short time we were off again.

The distance to Hall's Valley is not far but it is beautiful all the way. As you leave the Grand View House, appropriately named for the marvelous view of Santa Clara Valley, you travel a short distance and then make a right turn around a mountain. It's like turning a corner and coming out into another state. You pass the old Mt. Hamilton Vineyard, a famous old place, and now you can no longer see the Santa Clara Valley. The road swings around many turns and soon drops down into a beautiful small valley. Here is uncluttered beauty at its best. You notice cattle grazing; oak trees and ferns on the shady side of the road. Gaze up some of the small canyons and you will visually enter a solitude of virgin woodlands, with deer, rabbits and quail. Farther out in the valley a profusion of thousands of varieties of wild flowers. This is Hall's Valley, a place to remember and to the everlasting credit and thanks to the Grant Family it is the same today as it was then. Only a small portion of the road is changed and, of course, paved.

From Hall's Valley on you start to climb again and settle down for some solid pulling by the horses. Our next stop is Smith Creek and the day's work will be over for Jack and Tobie, Mack and Bob; and what a job well done!

As you near Smith Creek, the opportunity to make a sort of spectacular arrival presents itself. There was a nice little hotel, blacksmith shop, large barn, store and saloon. These buildings were situated in a circle, forming a plaza in the center at least a hundred yards across.

The road passes close in front of the hotel, on around past the other buildings and up to Mt. Hamilton. Due to the store and saloon (with emphasis on the latter) a goodly crowd of men that knew horses was generally on hand; and for this reason most teamsters, including Mr. Wiebel, took the opportunity to come in

with colors flying and their teams right up on their toes. I think Mr. Wiebel looked on it as sort of a tribute to his horses to let them have the acclaim they deserved. Anyway he didn't disappoint anyone for a short way up the road he got out his four-horse whip he hadn't touched thus far, and with a resounding crack, brought us past the hotel, around in front of the saloon and up to the barn with the horses performing in a manner suitable for the Rose Parade. The horses were unhitched and four more brought out of the large barn. Mr. Wiebel was right on hand and assisted in harnessing the new team. Each ~~xxx~~ horse had his own harness that was adjusted to his personal size. They were brought out with their harness on, then it was just a matter of swinging them into the proper positions and hooking up. When this was done, Mr. Wiebel stood at the head of the lead horses, took them by the bridles and stepped back a short distance--just enough to tighten the harness, then he walked around his team for a final inspection for this last section was the most trying part of the trip for the horses.

Smith Creek was run by a man named Brocky. He was a very good friend of both my father and Mr. Wiebel. Deer and quail were plentiful and there was wonderful trout fishing in the creek. For this reason it was a busy place during the various seasons.

The horses were ready to go and so were we young ones, but a slight delay ensued due to a popular place about that time--namely, Mr. Brockey's Saloon. It was a half-saloon, half-store. I can see it now, and I will never forget the odor of barreled whiskey mingled with saddle soap and axle grease, the pot-bellied stove and rinky-dink piano. It is a fire station today--it could have been a museum of prime attraction.

Smith Creek is located at the foot of Mt. Hamilton and, just as we were leaving, Mr. Brockey came out and gave my mother a big bag of grapes. She thanked him and handed a large bunch up to Mr. Wiebel. He put them in the jockey box, a small compartment in the middle of the seat for small tools, etc. My mother spoke to me and said, "You'd better come back here and take a nap."



I immediately begged off from any idea like that; I certainly didn't want to be asleep and miss the chance I had been waiting for.

From here on the road becomes more dramatic. It is uphill all the way to the top and a stern test for the horses. An interesting remark has been passed as long as I can remember--that there are 365 turns--a turn for each day in the year. About a half-mile from Smith Creek Mr. Wiebel let me drive.

I can see his hands today. I have always had a compelling interest in peoples' hands and I make a mental picture of the difference between my mother's dainty but capable hands with her brown leather driving gloves, the lines held properly and pulling back as hard as she drove us down a steep grade. Then Mr. Wiebel's hands like two gnarled pieces of oak handing me the lines and showing me the proper way to hold them. The road was wide and steep now, the team traveling very slowly. Mr. Wiebel knew there was no danger, but not I. Danger was everywhere and of no consequence to me, for right now I was the equal of Hank Monk, Long-Line Thompson and all the other greatest of old-time stagecoach drivers that ever lived.

Think of the impact on a small boy to sit beside (to his mind) the greatest horseman in the world and drive a four-horse team up that steep, winding Mt. Hamilton Road. I can close my eyes today and picture those wonderful horses, each one coal black, their coats now glistening with sweat, the even cadence of their step, manes flipping up a little as their black heads bobbed in unison with every stride.

When we would stop to rest the team Mr. Wiebel would get down and loosen the foaming collars and hold them up so some cool air could enter. You could smell the sweat, and little puddles would appear under each horse as the sweat dripped off the belly bands; probably an offensive odor to some but absolute perfume to me.

The grapes proved a bust. They were so sour we couldn't eat them and occasionally Mr. Wiebel would throw one at a particular horse. <sup>he</sup> He thought was lagging a little. Without even asking I took a grape and threw it at the horses. I was in such a hurry to

complete the throw, I hit one of the leaders on the head. Mr. Wiebel said, "Just what would you have done if you had thrown that grape in Bob's ear?" I didn't know what to say. I thought maybe my idol was mad. However, in a short time I asked, "Mr. Wiebel, what do you think Bobby would have done if I had thrown that grape in his ear?"

He said, "Do you see that turn up there?" pointing to one far up the road, flanked by a steep canyon. "I knew a man who used to throw rocks at his horses and one time he threw one right in his lead horse's ear. The horse went to shaking his head and finally ran over the bank and spilled his whole outfit in that gulch."

"Where's that man now?" I asked. "He's down there in that gulch covered by a landslide his wagon caused rolling down." A likely story, no doubt, but it cured me of ever wanting to even see those grapes again. N

Now we are at about 3000 feet and we come to our first pinon tree. This is my favorite tree. Most people call them junipers; in the Southwest Indian country they are called Pinons. They have a small, delicious nut in their cones and are prized by the Indians. No exotic incense can outdo the fragrance of the pinon wood when burned. T

The road makes a turn past a fairly large, open hillside and directly in the middle stands this beautiful little evergreen. It is known to some people as Juniper Flat.

Now we swing along one of the few straight stretches and come to Manzanita Turn. Here the road makes a sharp turn around a little manzanita tree. I can see Mr. Wiebel's hand here--he probably didn't want to disturb the beautiful little tree, so built the road around it.

As we pass Manzanita Turn we are only about 100 yards from one of the many 100% switchbacks you encounter. This one is Horseshoe Turn and is well named. You approach from the north and in a matter of seconds are traveling due south.

Mr. Wiebel has long since taken over the driving, but I am grateful for the short time I was outrunning the hold-up men at breakneck speed. To complete the horseshoe turn properly with a four-horse team you must keep to the extreme outside, about half-way into a turn like this your wagon will come to a complete stop but not the horses. They continue on around the perimeter of the turn, back into a straight line and are off again. A well broke team will almost always come around at double time, the high horse at a trot and the off horse slowly pivoting until just the right moment and then, bango! he's right in there beside his partner to get things rolling again.

From here on the road continues steep and winding, as we inch our way up, we become aware of the intensifying view; everywhere you look there is much to see...

I have visited some of the most scenic spots in the United States, but right here, if you will look with all your senses, you will be visually rewarded with as much as any of our National Parks or Forests provide. To the north you will see San Francisco Bay and the mountains beyond. Santa Clara Valley in its entirety, partially ringed by the beautiful Santa Cruz Range. To the south a sea of mountains and canyons, finally disappearing in the hazy purple horizon. The reader should bear in mind, the time of which I speak was before the Santa Clara Valley gave way to subdivisions and other developments. I'm speaking of the time when, from the horseshoe turn you visually embrace the valley, blanketed by a solid carpet of white prune blossoms as far as you could see, from East San Jose to Los Gatos, especially the Campbell and Cupertino areas. Truly a breathtaking sight and all you had to do was look.

We travel on, always upward, and soon pass the brickyard. Here were made the bricks used in the construction of Lick Observatory. This place is dotted with remembrances, for we always stop here for a refreshing drink, even today. A mile or so on we come to probably the most dangerous part of the road. A stretch of about 200 yards had to be blasted out of solid rock; probably for this

reason the men doing the work didn't make it any wider than necessary. It almost seems they measured the width of a wagon and that was it. Anyone coming down had to wait; there was ~~no~~ room for one vehicle only--no passing--and over the edge there is a drop of several hundred feet.

The place is known as The Tunnel and actually it has only been in the last ten years that it has been widened, thereby making it a little safer for motor cars. However, at this point it's "Cuidado, Tunel Augusto."

We keep on and finally come to a place unforgettable for any traveler to Mt. Hamilton, the "Oh My Turn." This is a switchback around a rocky point and you actually seem to go right off the road and out into thin air as you continue around. I have seen people beg to get out and walk at this point, but after a few times they are all right, and all will readily admit they shall never forget the Oh My Turn. The view from here is even more exciting because you can see farther and in all directions.

To the east, almost never-ending mountains and valleys, with the snow-capped Sierras for a backstop. One of the most beautiful pictures I have ever seen taken with a camera was a photograph of Half Dome in Yosemite Valley, taken ~~from~~ through the great telescope on Mt. Hamilton.

Below, the Isabel Valley knives its way through blue mountains. Mt. Isabel is just to the south of Mt. Hamilton, separated by an enormous canyon with Little Sulphur Creek at the bottom. From the Oh My Turn, Mt. Isabel always looks so close, one imagines he can reach out and touch it.

Mt. Hamilton is about 4500 feet; Mt. Isabel is about the same, maybe a little higher.

We are almost at the top now. About a quarter of a mile on, we round the 20 Inch Turn, a companion piece of the Oh My and, to some people, just as hairraising. Now about another quarter mile straightaway along the north side of the mountain, you catch ~~again~~ your breath at another outstanding view. The entire San Francisco



-9-

Bay area, Mt. Tamalpais, and the mountains rising from the Marin shore. The sun on the water of the bay tries your eyes as you gaze on out to the Golden Gate.

The brake-shoe squeaks. We are at the top. I have traveled the Mt. Hamilton road many times with my own family, and when my daughter was young she would beg me to take *tell* her of trips I made up there many years before. I was glad she loved the country as I did.

My mother always referred to it as "going to the hills." Someday, with children of her own, that's what my daughter will do. She will go to the hills, and still, while our memories last, the old road will live in us as it was when I sat on the box with Mr. Wiebel and watched those marvelous horses, their black heads bobbing up and down like the tick, tick of encroaching time.